

U.S. Weighed Giving Iraq Weaponry

Idea Was Scrapped, Documents Show

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The Reagan and Bush administrations considered giving Iraq weapons and ammunition, directly and through other countries, newly declassified documents show.

The proposals appear to have ultimately been scrapped, but Iraq did get U.S. cluster bombs from Saudi Arabia and U.S.-made fuses for artillery shells from Greece, according to the documents.

The State Department released the cables and reports under pressure from Congress. They show repeated consideration of such arms transfers at a time when the United States was leading a worldwide embargo on sales to both combatants in the Iran-Iraq war.

Although publicly neutral since the eight-year war began in September 1981, the United States was clearly tilting toward Iraq to prevent an Iranian victory. But in 1985 and 1986, it is now known, the Reagan White House was secretly moving weapons to Iran in a bid to free American hostages held in Lebanon.

The administration, according to the documents released last week, was greatly alarmed at Iraq's response to the startling November 1986 revelation of U.S. sales to Iran. "If we are to retrieve our influence with Iraq . . . we must act quickly," Assistant Secretary of State Richard Murphy wrote Secretary of State George P. Shultz on Dec. 3.

On Jan. 21, 1987, an internal State Department document weighed the pros and cons of giving Iraq weapons. The Foreign Assistance Act gives the president special authority "to provide military equipment to Iraq" if he determines that "an unforeseen emergency" has occurred, said the writers, who indicated the Iranian siege of the city of Basra could be construed as such an

emergency.

Allen Holmes, undersecretary of state for politico-military affairs to whom the unsigned memo was addressed, wrote in the margin, "Excellent memo guys!"

Two weeks later, Holmes and Murphy wrote Shultz in response to his request for an "assessment of the advisability of shifting U.S. policy to permit the transfer of U.S.-origin weapons to Iraq."

"We believe that such a change in policy would be inadvisable and counterproductive," they concluded, despite persistent Iraqi requests for U.S. weapons and ammunition.

They said Iraq would not derive much benefit from the sophisticated weaponry, which would be incompatible with its other weapons, and raised concerns that U.S. arms would make it clear which side Washington was supporting.

The authors said they would be asking Shultz to make one specific exception to the U.S. policy, but they did not indicate its nature.

They may have been referring to an Iraqi request for infrared anti-missile systems for President Saddam Hussein's jet and three presidential helicopters. The sale eventually was approved but placed on hold in 1988 after Iraq used poison gas against members of its Kurdish minority, documents show.

In July 1989, after George Bush became president, the State Department again urged that the sale be approved "as a small goodwill gesture." But a department official said last week that it never went through.

In a January 1984 cable, the State Department informed roving Mideast envoy Donald Rumsfeld that it was considering a proposal to provide Egypt with additional M-60 tanks so that Egypt could give its Soviet-made T-62 tanks to Iraq. Officials say the deal eventually was scrapped because it was too complicated and politically sensitive.

A November 1986 cable from the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad to the State Department discusses the sale to Iraq by a Greek manufacturer of 100,000 artillery shells containing U.S.-made fuses.

The administration, responding recently to news reports about the Saudi transfer of 2,000-pound bombs to Iraq, admitted that the Saudis gave Iraq some U.S. weapons "inadvertently" and said it notified Congress of the mistake in 1986. It did not describe the types of weapons involved.